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FISCAL AND POLITICAL

Prison solutions have price tags

It is hard to imagine that there is anything Alabama's political leadership does not already know about the state's prison problems — except how they propose to address them. The chronic overcrowding of the system has been studied and discussed for years.

Now another task force has begun a year-long inquiry into the prison problems with the objective of

Systemic

Alabama's prison problems are systemic and any successful reforms must be systemic also.

making recommendations to Gov. Bob Riley. It is difficult to see what new ground this panel might break in this oft-examined area of state responsibility.

The basic facts have long been known. Alabama has far more prison inmates than it has prison space to adequately

handle and corrections officers to properly supervise. The system operates at more than 220 percent of designed capacity. This creates dangerous situations, as prison wardens have warned repeatedly.

It creates conditions that, in addition to posing potential dangers to the citizenry, prison personnel and inmates, will not pass tests of constitutionality. This leads to legal challenges that the state generally loses — and generally deserves to lose.

Overcrowding has been a problem, in varying degrees of severity, for more than two decades. The problem is systemic. The reforms must be systemic.

The latest task force will examine a number of options, each of which can be part of an overall solution to overcrowding. But the task force will find, as has every task force before it, that there are price tags on these options — fiscal price tags and political price tags.

Historically, governors and Legislatures have been unwilling to pay either one. Prisons aren't exactly a potent constituency well supplied with lobbyists, so it was easy not to vote for a level of spending on them that is commensurate with the inmate population. Politically, it was easy to campaign on get-tough platforms that sounded good to voters, but helped create massive overcrowding.

Among the options the panel will consider are:

- More early releases of inmates who are not deemed to pose a physical threat to the law-abiding populace. The creation of a second parole board two years ago led to the release of more than 4,000 nonviolent offenders, which eased the overcrowding problem — for a while. Lynda Flynt, executive director of the Alabama Sentencing Commission and a task force member, estimates that there are more than 1,900 low-risk, nonviolent offenders still in the system who would be candidates for early release.

- Building prisons and expanding existing ones. At least theoretically, Alabama could build a prison system with the capacity for the inmate population it has and deal with overcrowding that way. A consulting firm developed a proposal to do that two years ago.

But it will never happen. The cost of doing so was put at \$934 million. No decimals there; it's \$934 million. The state can't afford that, or anything remotely like that.

Some expansion might be part of an overall approach to prison problems, but it is unrealistic to think it can be a major part. Even if the state did have a billion dollars to work with, building prisons would be a poor way to use it.

- Creating additional transition centers that help ease inmates back into society through job training, education and drug treatment programs.

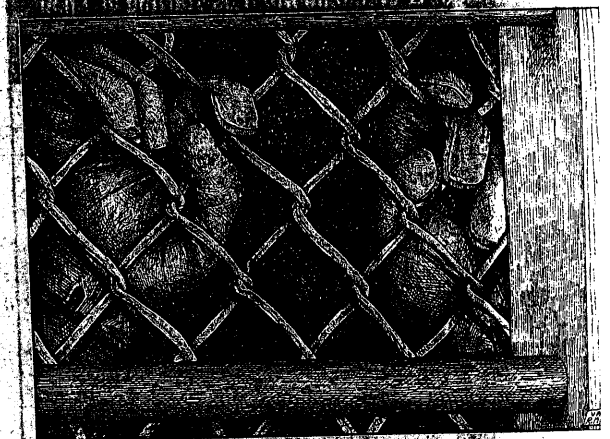
The General Fund budget awaiting passage on the final day of the legislative session on Monday contains \$2.75 million in operating expenses for a transition center for male inmates. But it doesn't contain the money — \$2 million — needed to renovate a former state mental health facility in Thomasville cited as a possible location for the center.

- Adding more community corrections programs, which are much less costly than prisons. Only 30 counties — less than half — have these programs now.

- Reforming sentencing. This is the one crucial systemic reform that holds the greatest promise for solving the prison problems. Alabama sends too many people to prison for nonviolent offenses. Most of these offenders could serve sentences in less expensive and more productive ways than simply being locked away in a penitentiary.

As the work of the special parole board has shown, Alabama has many offenders in prison who don't need to be there. This is only reinforced by the fact that the inmate population significantly reduced by the early releases that board granted, promptly began to grow again, largely because nonviolent offenders continue to stream into the prison.

Until that changes, the overcrowding problem is essentially beyond solving.



GOOD MORNING, GOVERNOR

You should forcefully urge the state Senate to pass the bill exempting Alabama's \$29 education investment program from state taxes when it convenes for the final day of the regular session tomorrow. It's good for Alabama families and decide in the long-term best interests of the state.

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